

The Failure of Syndicalism in Italy.

ITS LESSONS FOR AMERICAN WORKERS

For weeks past the capitalist press has been filled with big headlines about the "revolution" in Italy—how the workers in the metal factories had seized those factories and had attempted to operate them without the bosses. From the metal factories the movement had spread to other industries until some 1600 or 2000 thousand factories in Italy were in possession of the workers. This, according to the capitalist papers was the predicted "Soviet revolution" in Italy which was long overdue.

Then something happened which the papers were not very anxious to explain. A convention of the Italian Confederation of Labor held in Milan met and by a vote of 1,200,000 to some 600,000 refused to endorse the spontaneous action of the workers in seizing the factories. This convention also refused to take the next logical step—which was to overthrow the Italian Government and set up a Soviet Government as in Russia, as the only way in which to insure that Italian industry would in the future be run for the benefit of the working class without private profit to the capitalist class.

Instead this convention called upon the "moderate" Socialist parliamentary group to issue a call for the convening of the Italian parliament to pass laws which would create some form of co-operative functioning of industry, in which the workers and the capitalist would be represented.

Even this step was hailed by the capitalist press in this country as an extremist attempt to revolutionize industry.

In the meantime, the Italian workers refused to abide by the decision of the convention. They barricaded the factories and refused to give them up to the bosses. But the Italian Government, backed by the decision of the highest labor body in Italy, sent armed squads to dispossess the workers. In some cases the workers resisted and bloodshed resulted. In many cases, the workers, dazed by the action of the Italian Confederation of Labor, left the factories peaceably. They trusted their leaders and believed that from now on a new era in Italian industry had set in—the era of industrial democracy. Capitalist and worker would co-operate henceforth in production. Capitalist and worker would henceforth share the profits of industry.

Subsequently, the Metal Workers' Confederation met in Milan, and at this convention it was also decided to return the metallurgical factories to their owners and wait for remedial legislation from the Italian Parliament which the "moderate" parliamentary Socialists had promised them.

These are the bare facts in the recent Italian revolutionary crisis.

It is necessary for the American workers to understand this Italian situation in order that they may learn some valuable lessons from it for their own guidance in their struggle with their own capitalist class.

What really happened in Italy?

Italy as you know was neutral during the first year of the world war. Its people refused to shed their blood for the bloody imperialism of either Germany or the Allies. But its capitalist class was bribed with an offer of territorial and commercial loot, and like the capitalist class of America, threw the nation into war. Of course, the prostitute press shrieked about "democracy" and all the other nauseating slogans popularized by Wilson, the liberals, and the "moderate" Socialists, now so popular to the American workers. The Italian Government, instrument of the Italian capitalist class, passed Espionage laws and conscription laws, and browbeat the workers into the trenches. For four years the Italian workers shed their blood on the battlefields and supplied the army on the front with means for carrying on the frantic war. The women folk and children starved and suffered indescribably. But the Italian capitalist, merchants, manufacturers, bank trusts, and landlords reaped fabulous profits out of the suffering and sacrifices of the Italian masses. The cost of living had doubled and tripled and quadrupled. Bread was so scarce that thousands perished from hunger. Children died from malnutrition. Then came the armistice. The Allies had won the war.

The simple Italian peasants and workers thought that the period of their suffering and want was over. Autocracy was overthrown. Democracy had conquered. The last great war of humanity had been fought. Peace and plenty would now flow like wine for the poor and down-trodden workers and peasants.

But somehow, none of these things happened. The army was not demobilized immediately for the simple reason that there was no work for them. The Italian industries had broken down. Bread was scarcer than ever. The cost of living instead of going down began to mount higher and higher. Unemployment and starvation stared the victorious Italian masses in the face. But a strange phenomenon was going on. Whereas the workers and peasants were starving there arose a whole class of newly rich, speculators and profiteers who had made fabulous fortunes out of the war and who even now were reaping enormous profits out of the misery of the masses. They controlled all the necessities of life. Merchants, manufacturers, bankers, and landlords rolled in glazing wealth. But the workers starved.

The wrath of the Italian workers and peasants which had been smoldering all through the war began to flame up. The spectre of Bolshevism began to haunt Italy, as it began to haunt all the nations of Europe and America.

The Italian labor unions grew in strength and numbers. The movement spread to the farm-laborers and the peasants. The Italian Socialist Party, which all during the war had openly opposed the Government and the war, also gained numerically.

The Italian Government met and dickered and compromised and made laws for the relief of the masses which did not relieve. Matters went from bad to worse. The reformist Socialists kept on promising reforms. The anarchists led by Malatesta, inflamed the masses but had no program to offer them. The syndicalists who controlled the Italian Confederation of Labor, propagated the "direct seizure of industries and their operation by the workers themselves". Only the thin voice of a growing section of the Italian Socialist Party, the Communists, preached social revolution—the destruction of the capitalist-government and the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship through a Soviet Government, as in Russia.

Led by anarchists and syndicalists a movement began to spread among the workers for seizing the factories and operating them for themselves. This movement is similar to the policy of the I. W. W. in America, with which the workers here are familiar. As the struggle between the workers and the bosses became more acute—the workers demanding living wages which the bosses would not grant and threatened a general lock-out—the workers entered the factories and attempted to operate them.

The Government watched these steps with consternation but did not dare to intervene. The soldiers had more than once manifested a lively sympathy for the workers and could not be trusted to shoot them down in cold blood simply for taking and operating factories in order to feed their women and children.

The seizure of factories reached such a stage that all government and industry was paralyzed. The Government and the capitalist class knew this would fail so they left their hands off and waited. So did the Communists. The Communists preached that such a movement was bound to fail as the workers could not operate the factories themselves under a capitalist system and government. The Communists preached that state-power was necessary to centralize production, distribution and exchange. State-power was necessary to abolish private property rights. State-power was necessary to compel the clerks, the industrial experts, the engineers, the accountants, the managers and superintendents, etc. to stop sabotaging and continue functioning in industry. State-power was necessary to issue the decrees and enforce them to nationalize the banks, the mines, the railroads, the warehouses and the land. State-power was necessary to crush the counter-revolution of the capitalist class and their henchmen—the bureaucracy, the loyal parts of the army, the police, the mayors, the governors, etc. In short state-power was the first step necessary to insure the victory of the workers.

But the syndicalists had no such programme. Faced with this spontaneous action on the part of the rank and file of the working class of Italy they called a convention to decide the question of retaining the factories or returning them on the promise of the capitalist government to make new laws that would establish some form of co-operative production in industry between the workers and the owners.

Here is where the syndicalists of Italy fell down with their policy of "seizure of the industries" and ignoring the existence of the capitalist government with its army, police and law-making and law-enforcing powers.

Syndicalists, like the Communists, are opposed to all forms of government. But whereas the Communists recognize the necessity of a workers' government in the transition period from Capitalism to Communism, in order to suppress the capitalist class and their counter-revolutionary plots to overthrow the workers' rule to expropriate the capitalist class, and build up the machinery of government and industry that will insure the supremacy of the workers and their ability to feed and clothe themselves—the syndicalist are even opposed to that.

Their plan is to "seize the industries" and then the capitalist government will collapse of itself. After that there is no necessity to establish a workers' government—they only need to control and run the industries.

The convention of the Italian Confederation of Labor was faced with this problem. If it officially endorsed the action of the workers in seizing the factories, and called upon them to hold and operate them; by this act the Confederation of Labor would have challenged the capitalist government and set itself up as a provisional workers' government in its stead. It would have had to issue the order to the workers to destroy the old government by force of arms and to defend the new government.

But as we have explained, the syndicalists are opposed to all Governments. They are just as much averse to the workers' government as to the capitalist government. Being in a majority at the convention they defeated this plan which was brought in by the Executive Com-

mittee of the Italian Socialist Party (soon the Communist Party). There was only one thing left to do. To issue the order to return the factories to their owners and accept the promise of the reformist socialists (who are also opposed to the proletarian revolution) to write new laws upon the statute books that would give the workers some form of co-operation in the control and management of industry.

When these laws are passed by the Italian Parliament they will be in effect something which many of the American workers are already familiar with—profit-sharing and Rockefeller shop-committee schemes.

Even the American Federation of Labor, reactionary as it is, knows what this means and is opposed to it. It means the elimination of unionism in the industries and its place is taken by representation of the workers and the bosses on one committee to arbitrate wages, hours, conditions and disputes in each factory.

Those of you workers who are unfortunate enough to belong to such unions, such as the Amalgamated Garment Workers Union, The International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and others, know what this means. The workers are tricked and a board of arbitration compels the workers to accept whatever awards are made. Strikes as retaliatory weapons are frowned upon and the treacherous contracts between the unions and the bosses make it illegal.

As for profit-sharing schemes, these are old American capitalist tricks to intensify exploitation—to increase production at the expense of the workers. Profit-sharing breaks down all the safeguards that the workers have won by tens of years of struggle as to hours and working conditions. Profit-sharing means increasing the employers' profits by increased production due to intensified exploitation of the workers, and a return to the old heart-breaking competition between workers and workers for jobs. It means that the bonuses are held up by the bosses so that the workers can't strike under pain of losing the fruits of their year's exploitation.

This is the result which the Italian workers have gained by following the leadership of the syndicalists of Italy. Of course, it is not the last act in the drama. The next act will open with the Italian workers turning to the Italian Communist Party for the overthrow of the Italian capitalist government and the establishment of a Dictatorship of the Proletariat in the form of a Soviet Government, as in Russia. The Italian workers, after this betrayal by their syndicalist and reformist Socialist leaders, will turn more and more to Soviet Russia for guidance.

They will learn, as the workers of all other countries, including America, will learn, that there is no peaceful road to their emancipation. They will learn to turn their backs on those leaders who counsel "seizure of industry" ignoring the capitalist government—and the reformist Socialists (like the Socialist Party in America) who preach to them that they can accomplish the social revolution by the ballot box. They will learn that the present capitalist government, whether it be a constitutional monarchy like Italy or England, or a parliamentary democracy like France or the United States, is the concealed dictatorship of the capitalist class—the instrument of the capitalist class to suppress and oppress the working class. They will learn that this so-called democracy has been so constructed and so developed by the capitalists, that it is impossible for the workers to use it for their own purposes. They will learn that they must destroy this form of government—which functions only in the interest of the capitalist class, and establish a government which functions only in the interests of the working class—a Soviet Government, based upon Workers' Councils in the shops and factories, from which those who do no useful work in society will be excluded. They will learn that such a revolution cannot be accomplished peacefully either through the ballot-box, or by the peaceful seizure of industry. They will learn that no ruling class ever gave up its power without a violent struggle with the class that sought to displace them as the ruling class. They will learn that the capitalist class that now rules throughout the world, are prepared to use all the power of their governments, the army, the navy, the police, the gunmen, White Guards, the spies, the detectives, the office-holders, the courts, the hangmen, etc. to crush any attempt on the part of the workers to overthrow their governments. In Italy to-day, the capitalist class is feverishly organizing a White Guard to crush the coming proletarian revolution for state-power. They will learn to throw off the bourgeois ideology, the bourgeois lies, the bourgeois prejudices with which the capitalist class through the press, pulpit, schools, etc. fetter their minds and make them incapable of acting in their own interests.

The Italian workers are learning fast. The syndicalist fiasco which held them back for a time—even though it was a costly lesson,—will in the end only hasten the coming of the social revolution.

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